

THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TRACTATE

Containing

Various Disquisitions,

By means of which it is shown not only that Freedom of Philosophising can be allowed in Preserving Piety and the Peace of the Republic: but also that it is not possible for such Freedom to be upheld except when accompanied by the Peace of the Republic and Piety Themselves.

The First Epistle of John, Chapter 4, Verse 13.

*Through this means we recognise that we remain in God, and God remains in us—
that He gave to us from His own Spirit.*

Hamburg,

from Heinrich Künraht.

1670

PREFACE

If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resource, and their immoderate greed for fortune's fickle favours often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds. In critical times they are swayed this way or that by the slightest impulse, especially so when they are wavering between the emotions of hope and fear; yet at other times they are overconfident, boastful and arrogant.

No one can be unaware of these truths, even though I believe that men generally know not their own selves. For no one can have lived in this world without realising that, when fortune smiles at them, the majority of men, even if quite unversed in affairs, are so abounding in wisdom that any advice offered to them is regarded as an affront, whereas in adversity they know not where to turn, begging for advice from any quarter; and then there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain which they will not follow. Again, even the most trivial of causes are enough to raise their hopes or dash them to the ground. For if, while possessed by fear, they see something happen that calls to mind something good or bad in the past, they believe that this portends a happy or unhappy issue, and this they therefore call a lucky or unlucky omen, even though it may fail them a hundred times. Then again, if they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity, and they therefore regard it as a pious duty to avert the evil by sacrifice and vows, susceptible as they are to superstition and opposed to religion. Thus there is no end to the kind of omens that they imagine, and they read extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in their madness.

This being the case, we see that it is particularly those who greedily covet fortune's favours who are the readiest victims of superstition of every kind, and it is especially when they are helpless in danger that they all implore God's help with prayers and womanish tears. Reason they call blind, because it cannot reveal a sure way to the vanities that they covet, and human wisdom they call vain, while the delusions of the imagination, dreams and other childish absurdities are taken to be the oracles of God. Indeed, they think that God, spurning the wise, has written his decrees not in man's mind but in the entrails of beasts, or that by divine inspiration

and instigation these decrees are foretold by fools, madmen or birds. To such madness are men driven by their fears.

It is fear, then, that engenders, preserves and fosters superstition. If anyone seeks particular examples to confirm what I have said, let him consider Alexander. It was only when he first learnt to fear fortune at Pylae Susidis (Curtius, Book 5, ch. 4) that superstition drove him to employ seers.¹ After his victory over Darius he ceased to consult prophets and seers until he was once more dismayed by his plight. With the Bacrians having deserted and Scyths taking the offensive while he himself lay wounded on his sickbed, he again (Curtius, Book 7, ch. 7) “having recourse once more to superstition, that mockery of human wisdom, bade Aristander, in whom he had instilled his own credulity, enquire the issue by sacrifices.” Numerous examples of this kind can be cited, illustrating quite clearly the fact that only while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition, that all the objects of spurious religious reverence have been no more than phantoms, the delusions springing from despondency and timidity, and that, finally, it is in the times of the state’s gravest perils that seers have held the strongest sway over the people and have been most formidable to their own rulers. But since I consider that this is quite common knowledge, I will say no more.

This being the origin of superstition—in spite of the view of some who assign it to a confused idea of deity possessed by all mortals—it clearly follows that all men are by nature liable to superstition. It follows that superstition, like all other instances of hallucination and frenzy, is bound to assume very varied and unstable forms, and that, finally, it is sustained only by hope, hatred, anger and deceit. For it arises not from reason but from emotion, and emotion of the most powerful kind. So men’s readiness to fall victim to any kind of superstition makes it correspondingly difficult to persuade them to adhere to one and the same kind. Indeed, as the multitude remains ever at the same level of wretchedness, so it is never long contented, and is best pleased only with what is new and has not yet proved delusory. This inconstancy has been the cause of many terrible uprisings and wars, for—as is clear from the above, and as Curtius, too, says so well in Book 4, ch. 10—“the multitude has no ruler more potent than superstition.” So it is readily induced, under the guise of religion, now to worship its rulers as gods, and then again to curse and condemn them as mankind’s common bane. To counteract this unfortunate tendency, immense efforts have been made to invest religion, true or false, with such pomp and ceremony that it can sustain any shock and constantly evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers. In this the Turks have achieved the greatest measure of success. They hold even discussion of religion to be sinful,

and with their mass of dogma they gain such a thorough hold on the individual's judgment that they leave no room in the mind for the exercise of reason, or even the capacity to doubt.

Granted, then, that the supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honour, to spend their blood and their lives for the glorification of one man. Yet no more disastrous policy can be devised or attempted in a free commonwealth. To invest with prejudice or in any way coerce the citizen's free judgment is altogether incompatible with the freedom of the people. As for those persecutions that are incited under the cloak of religion, they surely have their only source in this, that law intrudes into the realm of speculative thought, and that beliefs are put on trial and condemned as crimes. The adherents and followers of these beliefs are sacrificed, not to the public weal, but to the hatred and savagery of their opponents. If under civil law 'only deeds were arraigned, and words were not punished',² persecutions of this kind would be divested of any appearance of legality, and disagreement would not turn into persecution.

Now since we have the rare good fortune to live in a commonwealth where freedom of judgment is fully granted to the individual citizen and he may worship God as he pleases, and where nothing is esteemed dearer and more precious than freedom, I think I am undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task in demonstrating that not only can this freedom be granted without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom.

This, then, is the main point which I have sought to establish in this treatise. For this purpose my most urgent task has been to indicate the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion—that is, the relics of man's ancient bondage—and then again the false assumptions regarding the right of civil authorities. There are many who, with an impudence quite shameless, seek to usurp much of this right and, under the guise of religion, to alienate from the government the loyalty of the masses, still prone to heathenish superstition, so that slavery may return once more. But before going on to discuss briefly my arrangement of this exposition, I shall first set forth the causes that have induced me to write.

I have often wondered that men who make a boast of professing the Christian religion, which is a religion of love, joy, peace, temperance and honest dealing with all men, should quarrel so fiercely and display the bitterest hatred towards one

another day by day, so that these latter characteristics make known a man's creed more readily than the former. Matters have long reached such a pass that a Christian, Turk, Jew or heathen can generally be recognised as such only by his physical appearance or dress, or by his attendance at a particular place of worship, or by his profession of a particular belief and his allegiance to some leader. But as for their way of life, it is the same for all. In seeking the causes of this unhappy state of affairs, I am quite certain that it stems from a wide-spread popular attitude of mind which looks on the ministries of the Church as dignities, its offices as posts of emolument and its pastors as eminent personages. For as soon as the Church's true function began to be thus distorted, every worthless fellow felt an intense desire to enter holy orders, and eagerness to spread abroad God's religion degenerated into base avarice and ambition. The very temple became a theatre where, instead of Church teachers, orators held forth, none of them actuated by desire to instruct the people, but keen to attract admiration, to criticise their adversaries before the public, and to preach only such novel and striking doctrine as might gain the applause of the crowd. This inevitably gave rise to great quarrels, envy and hatred, which no passage of time could assuage. Little wonder, then, that of the old religion nothing is left but the outward form—wherein the common people seem to engage in base flattery of God rather than his worship—and that faith has become identical with credulity and biased dogma. But what dogma!—degrading rational man to beast, completely inhibiting man's free judgment and his capacity to distinguish true from false, and apparently devised with the set purpose of utterly extinguishing the light of reason. Piety and religion—O everlasting God—take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt—these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous) who are believed to possess the divine light! Surely, if they possessed but a spark of the divine light, they would not indulge in such arrogant ravings, but would study to worship God more wisely and to surpass their fellows in love, as they now do in hate. They would not persecute so bitterly those who do not share their views: rather would they show compassion, if their concern was for men's salvation, and not for their own standing.

Furthermore, if they did indeed possess some divine light, this would surely be manifested in their teaching. I grant that they have expressed boundless wonder at Scripture's profound mysteries, yet I do not see that they have taught anything more than the speculations of Aristotelians or Platonists, and they have made Scripture conform to these so as to avoid appearing to be the followers of heathens. It was not enough for them to share in the delusions of the Greeks: they have sought to

represent the prophets as sharing in these same delusions. This surely shows quite clearly that they do not even glimpse the divine nature of Scripture, and the more enthusiastic their admiration of these mysteries, the more clearly they reveal that their attitude to Scripture is one of abject servility rather than belief. And this is further evident from the fact that most of them assume as a basic principle for the understanding of Scripture and for extracting its true meaning that it is throughout truthful and divine—a conclusion which ought to be the end result of study and strict examination; and they lay down at the outset as a principle of interpretation that which would be far more properly derived from Scripture itself, which stands in no need of human fabrications.

When I pondered over these facts, that the light of reason is not only despised but is condemned by many as a source of impiety, that merely human suppositions are regarded as divine doctrine and that credulity is looked upon as faith; and when I saw that the disputes of philosophers are raging with violent passion in Church and Court and are breeding bitter hatred and faction which readily turn men to sedition, together with other ills too numerous to recount here, I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it. With this precaution I formulated a method of interpreting the Bible, and thus equipped I began first of all to seek answers to these questions: What is prophecy? In what way did God reveal himself to the prophets? Why were these men acceptable to God? Was it because they attained rare heights in their understanding of God and Nature? Or was it only because of their piety? With the answers to these questions I had no difficulty in deciding that the authority of the prophets carries weight only in matters concerning morality and true virtue, and that in other matters their beliefs are irrelevant to us.

I then went on to enquire why the Hebrews were called God's chosen people. When I realised that this was for no other reason than that God chose for them a certain territory where they might live in security and wellbeing, I was led to understand that the Law revealed by God to Moses was simply the laws of the Hebrew state alone, and was therefore binding on none but the Hebrews, and not even on them except while their state still stood. Furthermore, to ascertain whether Scripture taught that the human intellect is naturally corrupt, I resolved to enquire whether universal religion—i.e. the divine law revealed to all mankind through the Prophets and the Apostles—differed from the teachings of the natural light of reason; and, again, whether miracles contravene the order of Nature, and whether they demonstrate God's existence and providence with greater clarity and certainty than events which we understand clearly and distinctly through their prime causes.

Now I found nothing expressly taught in Scripture that was not in agreement with the intellect or that contradicted it, and I also came to see that the prophets taught only very simple doctrines easily comprehensible by all, setting them forth in such a style and confirming them by such reasoning as would most likely induce the people's devotion to God. So I was completely convinced that Scripture does not in any way inhibit reason and has nothing to do with philosophy, each standing on its own footing. To demonstrate this in logical order and to settle the whole question conclusively, I show in what way Scripture must be interpreted, and how all our understanding of Scripture and of matters spiritual must be sought from Scripture alone, and not from the sort of knowledge that derives from the natural light of reason. I then pass on to indicate the prejudiced beliefs that originate from the fact that the common people, prone to superstition and prizing the legacy of time above eternity itself, worship the books of Scripture rather than the Word of God. Thereafter I show that the revealed Word of God is not to be identified with a certain number of books, but is a simple conception of the divine mind as revealed to the prophets; and that is—to obey God with all one's heart by practising justice and charity. I point out how this teaching in Scripture is adapted to the understanding and beliefs of those to whom the Prophets and Apostles were wont to proclaim the Word of God, with the purpose that men might embrace it willingly and with all their heart. Then, the fundamental principles of faith being now made clear, I reach the conclusion that the object of knowledge by revelation is nothing other than obedience, and so it is completely distinct from natural knowledge in its purpose, its basis and its method, that these two have nothing in common, that they each have a separate province that does not intrude on the other, and that neither should be regarded as ancillary to the other.

Furthermore, as men's ways of thinking vary considerably and different beliefs are better suited to different men, and what moves one to reverence provokes ridicule in another, I repeat the conclusion already stated, that everyone should be allowed freedom of judgment and the right to interpret the basic tenets of his faith as he thinks fit, and that the moral value of a man's creed should be judged only from his works. In this way all men would be able to obey God wholeheartedly and freely, and only justice and charity would be held in universal esteem.

After thus making clear the freedom granted to every man by the revelation of the Divine Law, I pass on to the second part of our subject, namely, the claim that this freedom can be granted without detriment to public peace or to the right of civil authorities, and should be so granted, and cannot be withheld without great danger to peace and grave harm to the entire commonwealth. To establish these

points, I begin with the natural right of the individual; this is co-extensive with the individual's desire and power. Nobody is bound by natural right to live as another pleases, each man being the guardian of his own freedom. I go on to prove that nobody can really part with this right except by transferring his power of self-defence to another, and he to whom each man has transferred his right to live as he pleases together with his power of self-defence must necessarily retain absolute control over this natural right. Hence I show that those who hold the sovereignty possess the right over everything that is within their power and are the sole guardians of law and freedom, and that subjects should act in all matters solely in accordance with the sovereign's decree. However, since nobody can so deprive himself of the power of self-defence as to cease to be a human being, I conclude that nobody can be absolutely deprived of his natural rights, and that by a quasi-natural right subjects do retain some rights which cannot be taken from them without imperilling the state, and which therefore are either tacitly conceded or explicitly agreed by the rulers.

From these considerations I pass on to the Hebrew commonwealth, which I describe at some length so as to show in what way and by whose decision religion began to acquire the force of law, together with numerous other incidental matters of interest. Thereafter I prove that governments are the guardians and interpreters of religious law as well as civil law, and they alone have the right to decide what is just and unjust, what is pious and impious. I finally conclude that they can best retain this right and preserve the state in safety only by granting to the individual citizen the right to have his own opinions and to say what he thinks.

Such, learned reader, are the topics which I here submit for your consideration, topics which I am sure you will find interesting by reason of the great importance of the issues discussed in the entire work and in each separate chapter. I would say more, but I do not want my Preface to expand to a volume, especially since I believe its main points are quite familiar to philosophers. To others I seek not to commend this treatise, for I have no reason to expect them to approve it in any way. I know how deeply rooted in the mind are the prejudices embraced under the guise of piety. I know, too, that the masses can no more be freed from their superstition than from their fears. Finally, I know that they are unchanging in their obstinacy, that they are not guided by reason, and that their praise and blame is at the mercy of impulse. Therefore I do not invite the common people to read this work, nor all those who are victims of the same emotional attitudes. Indeed, I would prefer that they disregard this book completely rather than make themselves a nuisance by misinterpreting it after their wont. For without any advantage to themselves they

would stand in the way of others for whom a more liberal approach to philosophical questions is prevented by this one obstacle, that they believe that reason must be the handmaiden of theology. These latter, I am confident, will derive great profit from this work.

However, as there are many who will not have the leisure, or perhaps the inclination, to peruse the whole of this work, I feel obliged to state at this point, as also at the conclusion of the treatise, that I have written nothing that I would not willingly submit to the scrutiny and judgment of my country's government. If anything of what I say is deemed by them to contravene the laws of our country or to be injurious to the common good, I am ready to withdraw it. I realise that I am human and may have erred. But I have taken great pains to avoid error and to ensure that my writing should be in complete agreement with our country's laws, with piety, and with morality.

Spinoza's notes are indicated by asterisks; most of these are Supplementary Notes, which appear at the end of the work (page 573). Notes by Seymour Feldman (main annotator for this work), translator Samuel Shirley, and Michael L. Morgan are indicated by numerals and appear in brackets.

¹ [Spinoza makes ample use here and in Chapter 17 of the first-century (A.D.) Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus, the author of a biography of Alexander the Great, *Historiae Alexandri Magni*.—S.F.]

² [Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 12.—S.S.]